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# Interrogating waithood: family and housing life stage transitions among young adults in North-West Africa countries\*

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## ABSTRACT

The term 'waithood' has become increasingly used to describe the situations of 20-something males and females throughout the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). The suggestion is that, following a youth life stage, young adults' lives stall due to males' inability to obtain sufficiently stable and salaried employment to enable them to head new family forming households, which leaves young women, most of whom do not enter the labour market, unable to marry. We use quantitative and qualitative evidence from research in three North-West Africa countries (Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia) to argue that the situation is more nuanced. We conclude that youth life stage transitions in present-day MENA exhibit a region-specific combination of features. The combination is atypical globally, but neither intolerable for young people in MENA nor unsustainable societally.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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Arabs; divorce; housing; marriage; North Africa; youth

## Introduction

### Aims

The term 'waithood' was first used by Singerman in 2007, but its use began to spread only after 2009 when Dhillon, Yousef and other contributors devoted the book *Generation in Waiting* to identifying the definitive features and causes of the emergence of this new life stage. Waithood is said to be located between youth and adulthood, not necessarily confined to but most widespread in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Dhillon, Dyer, and Yousef (2009) explain '... how the institutions that govern education systems, the labor market, and family formation have failed to mediate young people's transitions, leaving them in essence as a generation in waiting' p. 12. They portray life courses in the region moving through three successive historical stages. In a traditional life course individuals stepped directly from childhood into adulthood. Following independence the MENA countries created a welfare life course that became dominant, at least as an aspiration if not the reality, with the provision of state education, a norm of public sector employment for the educationally qualified, and strong social protection for all citizens. This life course is said to have collapsed under demographic pressures. Youth's current problem is said to be that a post-welfare life course remains under-developed. Its development is said to need

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education that responds to market signals, flexible youth transitions into a less protected public sector and a less regulated formal private sector, plus access to credit to facilitate new family household formation. Currently young people are said to be caught between two life courses. 'This leaves young people in the situation of waiting to become full adults – a state of *waithood*' p. 16. Individuals' lives are portrayed as becalmed, placed on hold, due to shortages of jobs which pay salaries which would enable young men to marry and support family-forming households, which denies young women a pool of suitable husbands. Thus individuals are portrayed as cast into or beyond the margins of youth yet unable to progress to adulthood in societies where marriage and new family household formation are essential for recognition as a full adult (Assaad & Barsoum, 2009; Salehi-Isfahani & Dhillon, 2008). This *waithood* predicament has been described as 'liminal' – on or beyond all margins. For short periods liminality can be exhilarating. When it extends over years it is said to be disorienting, stressful, and anxiety-ridden (Bayat, 2013; Ghannan, 2013; Koning, 2009; Singerman & Amar, 2009).

The following passages use evidence from surveys of nationally representative samples of 15–29 year olds in three North-West Africa countries (Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia) to assess whether a liminal *waithood* has indeed become a normal life stage. For this purpose we introduce relevant evidence on progressions from education to work, but focus on family and housing transitions. This allows us to accomplish a second aim. A universal feature of youth, wherever and for whoever there is such a life stage, is that occupants feel the full force of macro-changes in labour and housing markets. We show that focusing on family and housing transitions accords equal visibility to a complementary feature of youth: its ability to act as a flexible buffer life stage, absorbing stresses that would otherwise become social crises.

### ***The Global North***

Some trends in MENA are worldwide, including many present-day school and college-leavers facing a choice between unemployment and low-paid precarious jobs (see Kretsos, 2010; Standing, 2011). There has also been a global trend for typical ages of marriage and first parenthood to rise. Delays in new family household formation in the West cannot be attributed entirely to new labour market conditions. Effective, aesthetically acceptable contraception, coupled with most young women's desire to establish themselves in occupational careers, enable both sexes to enjoy an extended youth, alternatively termed 'emerging adulthood' (Arnett, 2005). In the West young men and women typically experience a series of sexually intimate partnerships before 'settling down' (see Ermisch & Francesconi, 1999; Mercer et al., 2013). Young men and women, singly or as couples, experience intermediate housing careers prior to forming family-building households. Sheltered student housing enables some to make cushioned first steps out of their parents' homes (Rugg, Ford, & Burrows, 2004). Their next steps, and the first steps for those who do not progress through higher education, are typically into privately rented housing, sometimes shared with others in similar situations (Clark, Tuffin, Frewin, & Bowker, 2017; Heath, 1999; Heath & Kenyon, 2001; Roberts, 2013; Tomaszewski et al., 2017). Needless to say, opportunities and difficulties vary depending on local balances between housing supply and demand (Jones, 2001), on national regimes of housing tenure and state welfare (see Antonucci, 2016; Arundel & Ronald, 2016; Lesnard, Cousteaux, Chanvrlil, & V., 2016), and also on the extent to which young people can be assisted by parents and grandparents (Druta & Ronald, 2017).

One-step transitions from parents' homes into new family-building homes were common in the UK until the 1970s (Leonard, 1980) but are now exceptional. These 'traditional transitions' have remained common for longer in Southern Europe (Holdsworth, 2005; Holdsworth & Elliot, 2001), though there is now a debate about the extent to which Europe's south is still different (Lesnard et al., 2016; Moreno & Mari-Klose, 2016). Like still tends to marry like, especially in terms of educational backgrounds (Blossfeld & Timm, 2003; Martin-Garcia, Seiz, & Castro-Martin, 2017). Otherwise it appears that almost anything goes. Young people who leave may 'boomerang' back into their parents' homes (see Berngruber, 2015). Throughout the West the old normative sequences have collapsed. Marriage and parenthood can now

occur in any order. Cohabitation may precede or become a long-term alternative to marriage. It can follow or precede completing education and embarking on an employment career. Very little of this applies in MENA.

### ***Family and housing transitions in MENA***

There is definitely no emerging young adulthood life stage in MENA. Only a minority of women – mostly higher education graduates who obtain professional and administrative jobs, usually in the public sector – can access employment that is culturally compatible with respectable womanhood. Single young people are not expected to leave their family homes except when necessary, such as for education or work. Serial sexually intimate relationships are not acceptable, certainly for women. According to El Feki (2014), the prohibition of most forms of sex leads to constant pre-occupation with the topic. Nowadays young men and women can seek partners online and enjoy cyberspace romances (see Costa, 2016; Golzard & Miguel, 2016), Nevola, 2016). Females must make themselves available, appealing and seductive while maintaining the expected modesty and reputations of sexual purity (Jykiainen, 2016). All this is for fun, to experiment with presentations of the self. It is not a serious search for marriage partners. These are controlled by young men's and women's families. Young women's families may expect a costly wedding celebration, to be paid for by the groom or his family, presents for themselves, and the groom is expected to provide a family home for the new couple (El Feki, 2014; Singerman, 2007). Young people do not usually marry for love. They can only expect or hope that love (or at least mutual respect) will develop.

### ***Methods***

Our evidence is from interview surveys in 2015–2016 among nationally representative samples totalling approximately 2000 15–29 year olds in each of three North-West Africa countries (Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia). The research was initiated following the 'Arab Spring' of 2011 which drew international attention to discontents of the region's youth. Respondents were members of our target age group who were residents in nationally representative samples of households. They were always questioned by same-sex interviewers. There were questions about families of origin (fathers' and mothers' education and occupations), where the respondents had grown up, about their own education and labour market careers (if any), and whether they were currently single, in a relationship, married, divorced, separated, or widowed. They were questioned about their current housing, and whether they were still living with their families of origin or independently. We can compare the experiences of young people in the three research countries, by whether they were living in urban or rural settlements, and by their family and educational backgrounds. We can also set differences in the pace of making family and housing transitions in the context of respondents' experiences of jobs, unemployment, and periods when they were not in education, training, jobs or seeking paid work.

These quantitative surveys were accompanied by qualitative fieldwork in three contrasting regions in each of the three countries. Fieldworkers gathered life stories, narratives which sometimes focused on respondents' everyday lives, and sometimes on their views on selected issues such as education, jobs and/or migration. There were also focus groups and focused ethnographies. In the latter the focus was always on a group involved in a particular economic, political, cultural, educational or sporting activity. Here we use evidence solely from 18 individual interviews. Unlike in the quantitative surveys, the interviewees cannot be treated as representative of any wider populations. In order to become involved in the qualitative fieldwork young people had to be involved in some out-of-home activity, usually those on which the group discussions and ethnographies focused.

We proceed below with the national and regional contexts in which young people make their family and housing transitions in North-West Africa, then we identify which young people wait longest, and why. We proceed to query whether the years prior to marriage are really a liminal waithood for any socio-demographic groups. We explain how MENA young people's current experiences are enforced

by macro-trends in their countries' populations, economies, labour and housing markets. Finally, we identify region-specific features of pre-adult life stages, and discuss how young people's and their families' responses enable macro-trends to be rendered compatible with ultimately successful life stage transitions.

## Findings

### Contexts

Our three countries all became French colonies during the nineteenth century. Tunisia and Morocco became independent in 1956 and Algeria in 1962. The legacies of this colonial era include French being the most common second language. The countries have much longer histories as predominantly Arab and Islamic. They are much poorer than the European states across the Mediterranean. Algeria has oil and gas reserves. Morocco has phosphates and other minerals, as does Tunisia to a lesser extent. These inequalities in natural resources were reflected in the typical earnings of our young employees: average monthly salaries of €695 in Algeria, €519 in Morocco and €451 in Tunisia. However, as regards the circumstances of present-day young people, the over-arching contextual feature is the rapid population growth that occurred from the mid-twentieth century. The populations of the countries doubled then doubled again (see Table 1). Birth rates have subsequently fallen – to parity in Tunisia but remain well above replacement levels in Algeria and Morocco (Table 2).

Because we have nationally representative samples, the findings sketch the national contexts within which different socio-demographic groups build their lives. There has been a steady drift of populations from rural to urban areas. Sixty-three percent of our combined samples lived in the latter. Employment in agriculture has declined due to mechanisation and the replacement of family farms by large commercial agri-businesses (Farsoun, 2006). The region's cities are teeming with people, especially young people, as applies throughout most of the present-day Global South (Hansen, 2008). Despite the population drift, dwellings are more over-crowded in rural than in urban areas: averages of 1.62 and 1.47 persons per room (excluding utility rooms) among our respondents. Urbanites are the more likely to live in apartments and detached houses, while in rural areas traditional (older) dwellings are far more common. In rural areas 85% of the dwellings where our samples lived were owner-occupied, against 74% in urban areas where more properties were privately rented. Air conditioning and motor vehicles were far more common in urban than in rural areas (see Table 3).

Over-crowding was most severe in Algeria (an average of 1.8 persons per room against 1.5 in Tunisia and 1.3 in Morocco). However, Algerians were the most likely to have motor vehicles and air conditioning. Traditional dwellings and gourbi/bidonvilles (unofficially constructed 'shanty' dwellings) were most common in Morocco, but over 70% of dwellings in all three countries were owner-occupied (Table 4).

Mortality rates have declined and the populations have grown due to improvements in living conditions and food security, and in public health and medical services. Despite dealing with steadily increasing numbers, the proportions of young people completing all levels of education have risen. Among the 25–29 year olds in our samples, 38% in Tunisia, 34% in Algeria and 26% in Morocco were higher education graduates. Three times as many sons as fathers, and five times as many daughters as mothers, had achieved this level. During this upward trend, differences between males and females have been eliminated. However, while illiteracy has been virtually eradicated among young people, significant minorities, as high as 36% of our Morocco sample, are still not progressing beyond primary level (Table 5).

**Table 1.** Populations (in millions).

	1950	1980	2010	2017
Algeria	9	19	36	41
Morocco	9	20	32	35
Tunisia	3	6	11	11

**Table 2.** Total fertility rates.

	1960	2015
Algeria	7.5	2.8
Morocco	7.1	2.5
Tunisia	6.9	2.1

**Table 3.** All ages, males and females, 3 countries.

	Urban	Rural
Persons per room	1.47	1.62
<i>Type of building</i>		
Apartment	29	9
Detached house/villa	53	43
Traditional house	15	41
Gourbi/bidonville	2	6
Other	<1	1
<i>Tenure Q12</i>		
Owner/co-owner	74	85
Public tenancy	5	3
Private sector tenant	16	7
Free housing	4	5
Other	<1	–
<i>Household assets</i>		
116. Air conditioning	56	27
119. Passenger vehicle	42	28
N =	3730	2151

**Table 4.** All ages, males and females.

	Algeria	Morocco	Tunisia
Persons per room Q128/Q13	1.8	1.3	1.5
<i>Type of building Q11</i>	%	%	%
Apartment	27	28	10
Detached house/villa	52	21	73
Traditional house	20	42	16
Gourbi/bidonville	2	9	1
Other	2	–	–
<i>Tenure Q12</i>	%	%	%
Owner/co-owner	80	72	82
Public tenancy	8	2	3
Private sector tenant	5	21	13
Free housing	7	5	1
Other	<1	–	<1
<i>Household assets</i>			
116. Air conditioning	66	29	39
119. Passenger vehicle	51	35	25
N =	2033	1854	2000

**Table 5.** Education attainments among 25–29 year olds in different countries.

	Algeria (%)	Morocco (%)	Tunisia (%)
Primary or less	15	36	22
Middle or full secondary	20	34	40
Vocational	31	5	–
Higher education	34	26	38
N =	181	429	451

Unfortunately for young people, their countries' economies and labour markets have not expanded as fast as their education systems and populations. The outcomes are evident in Table 6 which divides 25–29 year old respondents, nearly all of whom had exited education, into employment classes. The business classes are employers and the self-employed, divided according to whether their incomes were in the upper or two middle quartiles. The salariat had employment contracts of indefinite duration and are again divided according to whether their incomes were in the upper or middle two quartiles. The informals were employed without written contracts but were earning enough to keep them above the bottom quartile. Those with lower (bottom quartile) earnings, and the currently (but not long-term) unemployed, are the precariat. The detached are the long-term unemployed: they had never been employed and were currently inactive in the labour market. However, this did not necessarily mean that they had no earned incomes. They might work casually as day labourers on farms, markets or building sites. Roughly a quarter of males and over a half of female 25–29 year old respondents were 'detached'. The female figure is inflated by the Arab Islamic culture which prefers or insists that women remain outside the labour force in conditions where any jobs offered will be unsuitable. Most would accept, and they would be keen to accept, salaried positions in education, health care and public administration.

Prevailing labour market conditions are the root cause of the alleged waithood condition. Young people exit education, and the waithood concept implies that subsequently their lives cannot progress. Men do not know when or if they will ever be able to obtain jobs that enable them to become parents in their own family forming households. Women do not know when or if they will find such husbands. Clearly, not all young people are in this situation. Some males, and fewer females, obtain decently paid and, in some cases, secure jobs. Among the 25–29 year olds in our samples, 44% of the women but only 14% of the men were already married. Superficially at least, the lives of many of the others appeared becalmed. Among those who had yet to marry, only 40% of the females and 30% of the males said that they could 'see themselves' getting married. When asked 'Why not?', among those who could not see themselves getting married, 30% of the women and 40% of the men said that they simply 'did not want to marry'. This was in a context where marital partners needed to be approved by both sets of families whose searches were normally confined to their own extended families and neighbourhoods. Young men and women might simply 'not want to marry' any of the visible candidates. Forty percent of males gave economic reasons for not wanting to marry (lack of work, insufficient income, the cost of a wedding or the price of housing). Further reasons why so many respondents simply 'did not want' to marry, will become evident below.

### Who waits?

Table 7 confirms the greater likelihood of young women having married by age 25–29. Their pace of marrying accelerated after their mid-20s and this 'rush' seemed likely to continue into their 30s. Among men any rush to marriage could commence only after age 29.

Morocco had the highest percentage of its young women married by age 25–29, and it also had the highest percentages who had already experienced divorce, separation and widowhood. Moroccan

**Table 6.** Employment classes by countries, 25–29 year olds (in percentages).

	Males			Females		
	Algeria	Morocco	Tunisia	Algeria	Morocco	Tunisia
Still in education	10	14	5	5	13	7
1a. Business class	8	1	2	1	–	1
1b. Sub-business class	7	16	2	2	3	<1
2a. Salariat	5	7	4	4	–	3
2b. Sub-salariat	3	3	3	3	2	1
3. Informals	27	17	18	9	5	8
4. Precariat	16	18	40	10	13	27
5. Detached	26	24	24	64	64	54
N =	308	223	324	280	129	370



males were also more likely than their Algerian and Tunisian counterparts to be married at age 25–29, but even in Morocco 76% of the 25–29 year old males remained single (Table 8).

There were no differences in rates or patterns of marriage between urban and rural areas (Table 9). In this and other respects, the findings from this research confound any expectation that urban youth would be modern while those in rural settlements would be different and traditional.

Among young women, but not among young men, a father with a university education delayed the daughters' marriages (Table 10). Once again, among young women but not among young men, progressing through university was associated with remaining single beyond the 15–29 age group (Table 11).

An even starker difference in the associations of a predictor varying by gender concerns labour market status. Among males, those in the precariat and those who were detached from the labour market were the least likely to marry during their teens or 20s. Relative success in building an employment career increased the chances of young men marrying, though three-quarters of the more successful groups (the business and salariat classes) were still single at age 25–29 (Table 12). Among young women it was different. Those who were detached from the labour market were by far the most likely to marry when relatively young. We will explain below that the different 'socio-cultural logics' of young men's and women's life course situations can explain this divergence in North-West Africa countries. Rational young men, having assimilated the local cultures, and aware of the prevailing realities in labour and housing markets, will see overwhelming advantages in delaying marriage. Equally rational young women will see things differently.

Only one of our interviewees had married and none had made the transition into independent housing. Anyone who was married was unlikely to be participating in the milieu from which interviewees were drawn. Atypically, the sole married respondent was a male. Rashid, age 30, was from Ain Taoujdate, a small town (population 22,000) in Morocco, midway between Fez and Meknes. He worked as an agricultural labourer and as assistant in a local café. Rashid had married when aged 20 to a 15 year old girl, a distant relative from Fez. The families had arranged this match. The couple had two children. 'She was very young when I married her. She was beneath the legal age to marry. I had to pay the local notary so that he would give permission.' They were still living in Rashid's family home. However, he had bought a plot of land and was gradually building a house for his family. Early marriage was customary in Rashid's family. These customs varied not so much from country-to-country as from province-to-province, village-to-town-to-village, and between neighbourhoods in cities. The enduring cultures were remnants of the original tribal cultures of the inhabitants.

**Table 7.** Marital status by age groups, 3 countries.

	Males			Females		
	15–19 (%)	20–24 (%)	25–29 (%)	15–19 (%)	20–24 (%)	25–29 (%)
Single	99	97	86	98	83	56
Married	1	2	13	2	16	42
Divorced or separated	–	<1	<1	–	1	2
Widowed	<1	<1	<1	–	–	1
N =	1109	1251	931	869	914	814

**Table 8.** Marital status by countries, 25–29 year olds.

	Males			Females		
	Algeria (%)	Morocco (%)	Tunisia (%)	Algeria (%)	Morocco (%)	Tunisia (%)
Single	88	76	93	62	49	55
Married	11	23	7	36	45	45
Divorced or separated	<1	1	–	1	6	1
Widowed	<1	<1	–	<1	1	1
N =	326	275	330	290	152	372



**Table 9.** Marital status, 25–29 year olds, by settlements.

	Males		Females	
	Rural (%)	Urban (%)	Rural (%)	Urban (%)
Single	85	87	56	56
Married	15	12	41	42
Divorced or separated	–	1	2	2
Widowed	<1	<1	1	<1
N =	331	600	300	514

**Table 10.** Marital status by fathers' education, 25–29 year olds.

	Males			Females		
	None or primary	Middle school or full secondary	Higher	None or primary	Middle school or full secondary	Higher
Single	84	92	87	52	60	78
Married	15	8	10	45	40	21
Divorced or separated	1	–	2	2	1	2
Widowed	<1	–	–	1	–	–
N =	630	239	60	549	200	63

**Table 11.** Marital status by educational attainments.

	Males 25–29			Females 25–29		
	Primary or less (%)	Secondary (%)	Higher (%)	Primary or less (%)	Secondary (%)	Higher (%)
Single	82	86	89	48	41	63
Married	17	14	11	48	56	37
Divorced/separated	1	<1	1	3	2	1
Widowed	1	–	–	2	–	–
N =	178	252	130	157	211	156

**Table 12.** Marital status by employment classes, 25–29 year olds (in percentages).

	Business class	Sub-business class	Salariat	Sub-salariat	Informal employees	Precariat	Detached
<i>a. Males</i>							
Single	81	71	69	75	85	94	93
Married	19	29	26	25	13	7	6
Divorced or separated	–	–	5	–	–	–	1
Widowed	–	–	–	–	1	–	–
N =	31	73	42	24	176	215	208
<i>b. Females</i>							
Single	100	46	77	71	73	72	42
Married	–	46	23	21	26	25	56
Divorced or separated	–	9	–	7	2	1	1
Widowed	–	–	–	–	–	1	<1
N =	6	11	22	14	62	143	462

## Why not wait?

Men who marry relatively young, in their 20s, thereby take a major step towards full adulthood in their North Africa societies. However, even those who are making excellent progress in employment compared with peers may not be able to afford to move into independent housing. Fifty-two percent of our male respondents who had married were still living in the homes of their parents (like Rashid) or another relative such as a grandparent. They were still not the senior males in, and heads of, their family households.

Both grooms and brides typically prefer, and the latter may insist, that on marriage they must move into their own places (see Population Council, 2011). However, as explained above, partners are usually selected from the finite networks of family, families known to their own relatives, and neighbours. If a young couple know and are attracted to one another, a young man may opt to marry quickly: the young woman will not necessarily wait. Likewise the bride may well overcome reservations about the couple's first marital home. Karima, a 28 year old Algerian female, lived in Akbou, a coastal provincial village.

It is coming but it is not yet official. The man that I am seeing is my friend. He thinks like my father. He studies and he works. He is serious. I want to make my life with him. Life with the parents-in-law does not bother me. I take the example of my mother. She took care of her mother-in-law. It is not a problem for me. But if this man comes to ask for my hand and my parents refuse, then I would not go against the advice of my parents.

For males there are usually over-riding advantages in waiting to marry. They can then progress in their careers, and increase their incomes and savings. The earnings of respondents in employment were increasing throughout their 20s, and this was likely to continue beyond age 29. The precariat could hope to move into employment or better paid jobs. In time males might expect to inherit a family property: we have seen that most dwellings in all three countries were owner-occupied.

In their 30s single males gain a wider choice of brides. Those of similar age to themselves make themselves available, or become increasingly anxious to marry. The women's own employment careers may enable them to contribute to household budgets, though most husbands will not want this to threaten their role as, and being publicly seen as, main family providers. The pool of available brides does not diminish in size as single males become 30-somethings. They have the option of a younger bride who may have the edge over the men's female age peers in terms of perceived beauty and an untarnished reputation.

Males can lead a young singles lifestyle while delaying marriage. Typically this means going out to hang about with male friends on neighbourhood streets, in town or city squares, maybe sometimes in a café, coffee shop or tea room. These are staple ways for young males to pass time while spending little if any money. They may also, though they are less likely to, play and watch live sport. This is the normal life of a single male 20-something in North-West Africa. Those opting for this life are not seen as social failures or retards. This includes the precariat and those who are detached from the labour market even though they could not afford to marry and would be regarded as unattractive grooms by young women and their families.

Zidane, an unemployed 23 year old male, was from Akbou, as was Karina (above), and was leading a fairly typical life for a young unmarried man in a village community. He explained that the district was socially and culturally conservative. At school Zidane had organised a drama group in addition to playing sports. He said that his main entertainment was still playing football, and he also played dominoes. He attended wedding parties to which everyone in the village was invited. The local rules dictated that sex life began after marriage, but, as Zidane observed, 'If a young man wants to marry he has to have money, and even if I get a job, with the wages around here I could never buy a house.'

Young men in urban areas had more free time options, and some were flouting all customs. Moktar was a 23 year old male student from a prosperous district in Oran, Algeria's second city. Moktar claimed to have been deeply affected by his parents' divorce which happened while he was at secondary school. He was in trouble with the police over a fight with a friend which was about a girl.

After that I made many false promises to girls, I started smoking cigarettes. Anything that is forbidden religiously, I did it. Oran is a place with lots of nightclubs, a proliferation of liquor stores and a number of brothels. I began to sell drugs, including powder. It brings a lot of money. I could wake up in the morning and find that I was rich. I used to go with friends to bars or discos and steal from drunken people. We also stole bottles of drink then sold them on the seafront.

Moktar claimed to have reformed since his brother left the family house in disgust and did not return for two years.

Aymen, a 26 year old male student, was from Zanouch, a small village 30 km from Gafsa (population 111,000), which is the main city in Tunisia's mining region. Aymen had been taking holiday jobs on Djerba Island (off the eastern coast of Tunisia, towards the Libya border) since age 15. 'There I learnt about money and women. I was in a relationship with a Czech woman who asked me to return with her, but as always, I thought of my family.' Aymen loved hotels for the pleasure of associating with foreigners.

I like to be with them. They are not like us. They are spontaneous. One year I worked in Djerba in a foreigner's house. I whitewashed the walls. He was nice to me. I met him in a nightclub where he and friends were drinking whisky and vodka. Daily life in a city is not like rural villages. In Gafsa there are game centres, a disco and cafes. In villages there are just cafes and nature. I have recently had a serious relationship with a girl in Gafsa. I used to invite her for a coffee in a café, then I used to take her to the student residential hall by taxi. But she made gaffes. Marriage will take place when I have the necessities. I have dreamt of having a car since childhood. I dream of having my own house which has a garden. But for now, the thing is to improve my economic and social situations.

Wajdi, age 23, had been unemployed since leaving secondary school. His family lived in the Ibn Khaldoun district of Tunis where he attended a youth centre and belonged to a rap group that was formed there. 'Rap is my passion, but rap leads nowhere. My songs on YouTube have little more than 1000 views.' In his neighbourhood Wajdi hung about with friends, sometimes in cafes. When they had some money they would go to hotels, nightclubs and bars. He had been only once to the cinema and once to the theatre. 'I did not like the film but being face-to-face with my girlfriend was a kind of compensation.' Wajdi mingled with girls without thinking of the future. For two months he had been with a 22 year old girl and vaguely knew that she was a student but otherwise knew little about her. 'In the case of any dispute, one relationship disappears and another is born.' At school Wajdi fell in love with a classmate. They were together each day, and every night they would talk on the phone. 'Then there was an argument and the relationship ended. That was tough at the time, but it is distant now.' Wajdi distinguished between the girls he wanted to mingle with and the one he would marry. 'She will respect moral practices.'

No female interviewees admitted to breaking any rules, but Khoulood knew of other girls who did so. Khoulood was a 20 year old university student who was living in a student hall in Ibn Khaldoun, the district in Tunis where Wajdi's family lived. Khoulood disapproved of the behaviour of some girls in the university residential halls: 'Going out at night, sleeping over, smoking, mingling with boys, uttering obscenities'.

### **Why wait?**

Khoulood was not waiting. She had been in a relationship with a fiancé for 18 months. He was from her original home village. There were issues between them. She wanted an egalitarian relationship whereas he was more traditional. However, Khoulood was holding on to him because,

Nowadays it is not easy to find a person who at age 27 is already mature, performs prayers, and behaves like an adult with his family and others. It's reassuring. I am not sure that I could find another person with these qualities, but I am watchful.

Young women in their 20s occupy different life course situations than males of the same age. This is especially, but not only, for those women (the majority) who never enter the labour market. Typically they rarely or never go out to hang about with friends in local streets or town or city squares. They rarely or never visit coffee shops, cafes or tea rooms. They are very unlikely to play or watch live sport. They spend more time online and watching television than any other members of their age group. There is no youth life stage for these young women: just years of waiting. Youth is a male prerogative in North-West

Africa, which historically has not been unusual world-wide. Young women must endure a prolonged childhood while they wait for a husband to make them adult wives and subsequently mothers.

Enneli and Enneli (2017) have observed that for similar young women in Turkey the life courses that they could customarily expect are no longer available due to the shortage of potential grooms. However, in North-West Africa, and probably in Turkey, women in their late-teens and 20s have the option of marrying an older male who is able to provide independent housing in which the bride will be the senior woman. Most young women's families can expect to receive offers from such men. Eight-one percent of the married women among our respondents had moved into independent households. Many young women appear unwilling to countenance starting married life with in-laws (Population Council, 2011). For some young women this appears to be a 'red line' that they will not cross. Most of the married women in our sample were younger than their husbands – much younger in some cases. Twenty-six percent of the husbands who had provided the brides with independent housing were 10 or more years older, another 36% were five to nine years older, 34% were up to four years older, and just five percent were the same age or younger.

Some of our unmarried female interviewees were 'in a relationship'. Kholoud was one. Others such as Asma had experienced failed relationships. Asma, a 22 year old female, was living with her family in Oran.

I had a relationships for four years. It did not work. I was young. I wanted him but he is from Chaoui and I am from Oran. He came to our house. Then his parents did not want me because Oranian girls have a bad reputation. Also, they said that Oran was too far and that I was too young. Now he has returned to his home.

Another 'red line', probably as much for young men as for young women, is avoiding a downgrade in the quality of their housing. The majority of married men in the quantitative surveys (most of whom were still living with their parents or in the home of another relative), and most of the married women, had maintained the quality of their pre-marriage housing in terms of whether it was an apartment or detached dwelling rather than a traditional house or a property that had been constructed unofficially. After marriage, overall, their homes were slightly less over-crowded. The main shift had been from owner-occupation into private renting which many would have regarded as a temporary necessity. However, husbands and wives who moved onto their own dwellings became less likely, at least in the short-term, to have air conditioning and access to a motor vehicle than when they had lived with their parents (Table 13).

**Table 13.** All ages, 3 countries.

	Single males	Married males, HoH	Married males, other	Single females	Married females, spouse of HoH	Married females, other
Persons per room	1.6	1.2	1.3	1.6	1.4	1.4
Type of building	%	%	%	%	%	%
Apartment	21	20	17	24	17	16
Detached house/ villa	49	48	42	50	55	56
Traditional house	26	22	31	22	22	22
Gourbi/bidon- ville	3	10	9	3	6	5
Other	<1	–	1	1	–	1
Tenure Q12	%	%	%	%	%	%
Owner/co-owner	80	56	64	80	62	65
Public tenancy	4	2	3	5	5	5
Private sector tenant	1	36	27	11	23	20
Free housing	4	6	6	4	10	9
Other	<1	–	–	1	–	–
Household assets						
116. Air condi- tioning	45	35	31	48	14	40
119. Passenger vehicle	37	26	42	61	43	29
N =	3114	173	159	2062	3	95

**Table 14.** Married and live independently from parents.

	Respondents' education, 25–29 year olds				
	None (%)	Primary (%)	Middle (%)	Secondary (%)	Higher (%)
<i>Spouses' education</i>					
None	42	10	2	1	8
Primary	10	–	1	–	–
Middle	23	43	36	24	11
Secondary	16	13	35	13	22
Higher	10	33	21	61	60
<i>N =</i>	31	30	84	75	37

For women in their 20s there are huge risks in delaying marriage. There are potential advantages: being able to marry someone of a similar age and, for women who are in employment, being able to continue in their jobs, advance in their careers, and then contribute to household budgets. However, as they reach their late-20s and more so when in their 30s, the pool of potential grooms shrinks. There is also more competition in the 'marriage market' from younger women. As women move through their 30s, a decline in fecundity accelerates. By then both men and women may feel obliged to cross former 'red lines' in terms of acceptable housing, the personal qualities and reputation of a bride or groom, women's families' expectations of expensive wedding gifts and celebrations, and a possible dowry.

Najoua, age 30, gained an MA degree then was unemployed for three years except assisting local college students with their studies and taking a Red Cross diploma (to add to her CV and fill the time). Currently she had a management/sales job on a large farm near Ain Taoujdate, the small Morocco town where Rashid (above) also lived.

In 10 years? I don't know. Maybe I will be married with children, maybe not married and have an important job, or maybe both or none of these options. When I feel useful and beautiful I don't care so much and I forget that I'm 30. But sometimes I'm depressed and I think that it's too late for me, especially when there are young women around. Then I see myself as old and I wish I could go back in time. When I see, for example, an old friend who is now a wife and has kids, I realise that it's younger girls who are in competition with me to marry. Then I feel 60 years old.

The respective educational attainments of married respondents and their spouses offer additional insights into the conditions under which men and women will marry relatively early, in their 20s. We have complete data for only a limited sub-set of the total sample – those aged 25–29 by when nearly all had completed their education, and the minority from within this group who had married and moved into independent accommodation. Most of the married respondents are women and most spouses in Table 14 are men. Most respondents who were higher education graduates had married graduates. In all the other educational groups the typical married respondent had a spouse who was more highly educated. It is likely that men who were able and willing to marry and offer independent accommodation when in their 20s, which was unrelated to their own education, could choose a more highly educated wife. Women who married in their 20s had typically married a groom above the age range covered in our survey. Our findings suggest that the 30-something men who had been accepted as grooms by younger women and their families had needed not only to be able to offer independent accommodation but also to be better educated than the brides. The hidden reverse side of this picture (in our age-censored survey data) is that those who delay increase the likelihood that, in terms of educational attainments, they will have to 'marry down'.

## Conclusions

There is no waitthood in North-West Africa; just normal youth life stage transitions for males with some region-specific features, and direct childhood to adulthood transitions for many young women. It has never been uncommon for men to delay marriage beyond age 30. It has never been uncommon for women to marry older men. This may reflect and reinforce patriarchy, but for women in their teens and 20s it often makes more sense to marry quickly than to delay until same-age men are ready to

start married lives in their own homes where husbands and wives can then become parents. Recent trends in North-West Africa have occurred in many other parts of the world where it has become more difficult than formerly for young people to embark on routes to adult occupations at age 16, then 18, then 20, then 25 and beyond. A response in most countries has been for young people to prolong their education and/or vocational training, expecting or hoping that 'knowledge jobs' will reward this investment in human capital. The trend judders to a halt when increasing numbers of well-educated 20-somethings fail to obtain commensurate employment.

In some advanced Western economies there has been a recent trend towards occupational structures regressing to pre-industrial forms with increases in both low-income self-employment and precarious employee jobs, while hitherto standard, secure, full-time employment shrinks (Elliott, 2017). In North Africa these pre-industrial occupational profiles have simply swept into the cities. Whenever and wherever there is an excess of labour supply relative to demand in (at best) weakly regulated labour markets (as in North Africa), it becomes possible for former good jobs to be degraded and decomposed into flexible, just enough (hours, pay and people) jobs in formal and informal/grey economic sectors. In many high unemployment areas in the present-day UK there is plenty of poor work available, and much in-work poverty (Shildrick, 2017). The same applies throughout MENA, and in this respect the region is not out-of-step with global trends.

The region-specific features of the youth life stage in MENA countries include the importance of demography rather than the 2007–2009 global financial crisis as the source of current transition into employment difficulties, and the persistence of a high proportion of women who never enter the labour market. Morikawa (2015) has argued correctly that North Africa's economies would benefit enormously if they fully used their available female labour. Our evidence suggests that most young women would join the young modern Moslems whose Islam embraces salaried jobs and consumer cultures, if given the opportunity (Janmohamed, 2016). Feminist voices protest at the restrictions that the region's young women face (Debuysere, 2016). They say that Arab women suffer double the oppressions of Western women (Haddad, 2010). However, these Arab feminist voices are not reinforced by labour demand. Western women moved into the labour market when they were needed in factories, especially during the World Wars. Afterwards there was an insatiable demand for office girls. North Africa has undergone none of these experiences. Its young people are seeking modern lives in an age of lean production, flexible businesses, ICT and AI. Young men have access to a singles lifestyle, albeit one which for some is largely devoid of female company. Romance and sex are confined to cyberspace and, for some, to sex workers and tourists. Youth in the MENA region differs from youth in the West in the absence of youth careers in serial sexually intimate relationships and housing. These youth careers became possible in the West following the post-1945 rise in real incomes, including young workers' salaries, contraception and jobs for young women. The MENA region has contraceptives but neither the prosperity nor the jobs. The outcome is not a waitthood life stage. In rural areas worldwide young men and women alike face a shortage of places to go and things to do. Young men in MENA concentrate on finding work. Their sisters concentrate on seeking and appraising potential husbands. Few young people are in truly liminal situations – excited, agitated, confused or distressed. They are experiencing normal and normalised life stage transitions in their countries.

The waitthood concept is packed with cultural power but proves brittle when faced with details about young people's lives. A focus on family and housing life stage transitions in North-West Africa, as elsewhere, confirms and illustrates the inter-connectedness of two universal features of modern youth which is likely to remain undetected within the more frequent focus on education-to-work transitions. First, youth are the most directly affected, in the front line, facing macro-changes. They are hit hard by any job deficit, or when poor quality jobs spread throughout any region. Youth are affected immediately by shortages of housing and rising house prices. A consequence in North-West Africa is that despite becoming less over-crowded, early in their married lives our respondents who had moved into independent accommodation were typically living at densities of 1.2, 1.3 or 1.4 persons per room (excluding utility rooms, which could be shared). Living in an apartment or detached house did not necessarily or

usually mean that the household occupied the entire dwelling. Our data imply that married couples who moved into their own households occupied just one or two rooms.

The complementary twin feature of the life stage is acting as a buffer which prevents macro changes becoming social crises. Youth and childhood can be prolonged or accelerated depending on demand for labour and the availability of housing. Families make this possible. They can support young people throughout a prolonged pre-adult life stages with free or low cost shelter, food and other essentials, and often something for non-essentials as well. Families do this until young people are able to become fully independent. Young people are the most vulnerable age group, but their lives are better able than those of others to act as a flexible social buffer.

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